nother blustery September morning in Whidbey Island found me going on my first cross-country in the Prowler. The plan called for an early launch, gas-and-goes at Hill AFB and Grand Junction, then on to NAS Fort Worth. I would be ECMO 1 for the first leg—my first flight in the front seat of the EA-6B.

We learned Hill AFB was not accepting transient aircraft that weekend. Being flexible, we adjusted our flight plan for a stop in Fallon. Our next snag during preflight was learning the jet had not been fueled. An hour later, after getting gas, we were ready to go. The other ECMO then said, "Well, at least the preflight's over; what can go wrong now?"

We planned to shoot a practice approach into Portland. En route, though, ATC said Portland wasn't accepting practice approaches—not a problem, we were flexible. After making another quick adjustment to the flight plan, now we were on our way to Boise for the practice approach. What could go wrong now? The flight continued without incident, and we figured we were over the hump.

Once on deck in Fallon, things went well until we walked to the jet to preflight and saw the left main tire had started coming apart. I was reminded of one of those lessons you learn in flight school: Never schedule a stop on a cross-country somewhere that you don't want to get stuck. However, a gleam of hope surfaced: Another Prowler squadron was in town, and they offered to change our tire. With this kind of luck, what could go wrong now? By the time the tire was changed, it was getting late in the day. We looked at our plan and realized the field in Fort

Worth would be closed when we got there, so it was time for plan D.

This plan consisted of an early launch the next morning for an instrument round robin. We would gas and go in Fallon, swap seats for ECMOs, hit one of the local MOAs, and then head to Grand Junction. I was ECMO 2 for the round robin, which went as briefed. We landed, refueled, rebriefed, and took off for the next leg. We hit the MOA, and the flight was going great. We finished the required syllabus items and made our way to Grand Junction. We had favorable tailwinds and good weather. What could now go wrong?

After entering the overhead pattern at the field, our gear and flaps normally extended. Rolling into the groove, we got a HYD SYS caution light, with an accompanying master-caution light. The HYD SYS light comes on when pressure in one of the hydraulic systems drops below 1,400 psi. In this case, the pressure in the combined system read zero. Keep in mind: This was my second flight in the front seat. My thoughts were, "Land now." But the instructor pilot had other ideas. We waved off the approach and looked at our options. With a hydraulic failure, we knew we wanted to take a trap, but Grand Junction had no arresting gear.

Crew coordination became critical. ECMO 2, a former TPS guy, was in a back seat where he had plenty of experience. He broke out the field diagrams and looked at the best options. Checking our nav sources, I figured Hill AFB and Buckley AFB each were about 180 miles away.

The pilot electrically raised the flaps and slats. This action would decrease our fuel-flow rate. At the same time, ECMO 2 ran bingo numbers. I told tower we had to troubleshoot a minor malfunction. Once ECMO 2 passed the bingo



numbers to us, we realized we were 400 pounds below dirty bingo to either field. We could not raise our gear, the brakes were suspect, and the speed brakes didn't work. Also, other key items to slowing a Prowler on the runway would not be available.

After a moment or two of quiet contemplation, the pilot said, "Give me steering to Buckley, squawk emergency, and read me the bingo-profile numbers."

I completed these items as fast as I could. I told ATC we were bingo fuel and were proceeding to Buckley. ATC had us climb to 10,000 feet and switch freqs. My pilot looked at me and said he wasn't convinced the controller knew what "bingo" meant. When I established contact with the next controller, I let him know we were declaring an emergency for low fuel. He understood what "bingo" meant.

Now that we were comfortably established on our bingo profile, I asked why we had started a bingo when we were below bingo fuel. The abbreviated answer was that the gear-down flaps-up bingo numbers in the PCL assume a start from sea level, no wind, and extension of the landing gear, using the emergency system. This last assumption would mean that the forward main-landing-gear doors were open, which increases the amount of drag on the jet. I remembered we had extended our gear and flaps normally; therefore, our forward main-gear doors were closed, and we would burn less fuel. Finally, Grand Junction's elevation is about 5,000 feet, and we had a 50-knot tail wind. I just had heard a little piece of knowledge I never would forget.

We ran through the checklist and prepared to take a trap. The Buckley crash crew was waiting for us. Fortunately, we trapped without major incident. On deck, however, when we were pulled out of the gear, the auxiliary brakes didn't work. My IP had to actuate the emergency brakes to get the plane to stop rolling backward. The combined hydraulic system had bled out completely, bringing up an interesting question: Would we have had aux brakes at Grand Junction had we landed there? We would have found out the hard way. With a field elevation of 5,000 feet, warm temperatures, and no arresting gear, the pilot had decided he did not want to test the aux brakes there.

We brief to handle emergencies in accordance with NATOPS and good headwork. In our case, the good headwork was knowing the environment and the airplane systems. On deck, we realized something always can go wrong no matter how good or bad things are going. I was with an experienced RAG-instructor pilot who knew his stuff cold. We realized it could have been a lot worse—it could have been raining.

Lt. Winston flies with VAQ-133.

